



Protesting against Star Wars-style space exploration: members of The Association of Autonomous Astronauts, an international network founded four years ago in a Brixton squat

THEY come in peace — and more than likely in sequin-covered space-suits. This weekend, hundreds of sci-fi-obsessed philosophers and pranksters are expected to crash-land in London for a 10-day festival that includes seminars on how to build your own rocket, outdoor astronaut training on Hampstead Heath, a "psychic attack" on Nasa that involves smashing up TV sets with sledgehammers, and an "all-night rave in space" (the programme states that the venue has yet to be decided, which may or may not be an intentional joke).

The organisation behind this odd gathering is The Association of Autonomous Astronauts (AAA), an international network founded four years ago in a Brixton squat and dedicated to the intriguing concept of "independent, community-based space exploration". The original aim was for everyone to start constructing their own spaceships. Unsurprisingly, no one has yet achieved this, although a chap called Ziggy has apparently progressed to extremely upmarket fireworks using Clapham Common as his Cape Canaveral.

Despite this limited success, the London base has spawned 60 groups of similarly astral-minded followers worldwide, dedicated to exploring the political, social, economic and cultural possibilities of space. In between playing three-sided football and arguing about what to wear to meet the aliens, that is.

"It is without question one of the most hedonistic space programmes I have heard of," says John Eden, who is chairing Saturday's keynote Intergalactic Conference. "The others are all about getting up there, doing 17-hour shifts, lots of experiments and then coming home. We have always said we want to play football, have sex and hold raves."

Nasa staff must be quaking in their moon boots at the competition. "I don't think they are brave enough to recognise us officially,"

Take me to your loonies

Who says all space explorers want to be first to walk on Mars? This weekend London hosts a festival for astronauts who would rather 'play three-sided football, have sex and hold raves' in space. **TIM LUSHER** reports

says Stuart Buchanan, who runs a London cell called The Foundation for Art in Zero Gravity Environments (he is the sole member). "In many respects, they are the enemy. The way I have always looked at it, the next step in the evolution of the human race is space and discovering new worlds. At the moment, Nasa is running the only realistic space programme, therefore it is effectively driving the evolution of the species. We regard the direction it has taken as wrong because it seeks to perpetuate what's happening here." He pauses before delivering his punch line. "It's a waste of space, in a way."

AAA, in case you have not guessed, is a philosophical mission manned by cosmic thinkers who know just when to take their head out of the clouds and slip their tongue into their cheek. For them, space is about rethinking society with a clean slate. It is a protest against the Star Wars approach to

extra-terrestrial exploration. It is also simply the global club you get when you throw together hundreds of people weaned on teatime episodes of Doctor Who during the Seventies.

"People have said we are just a bunch of hippies," says Buchanan. "That's wrong; hippies were about dropping out; AAA is about engaging. A lot of it's about fun, but it's not about taking the piss. It's trying to raise awareness of certain issues without being hectoring, and the best way to do that is through humour. But it's not about dressing up in spacesuits and being wacky."

True to his word, Buchanan is rather disappointingly clad in distinctly unwacky Stussy T-shirt and Carhartt jeans, but then he does have a down-to-earth day-job in marketing at the Royal Court. So, is all this talk about building rockets just a ruse to make themselves sound sexy? "No!" says Eden.

"When we want to make it sexy, we talk about having sex in space. We believe it's going to be much better than on earth because of the new positions that will be possible in zero gravity."

They are also very excited about the concept of three-sided football, where teams refuse to declare whom they are playing for and the aim is to score as few goals as possible. It sounds hopelessly confusing to watch. "Uh-uh — and to play," says Buchanan. "You don't know who's friend or foe. It's madness."

In other words, it's vintage AAA fun. The mistake when dealing with this star-struck bunch is to get bogged down in boring practicalities like the nuts, bolts and booster jets of rocket science. "It's all about getting people to think about what life might be like when we leave the planet," explains Eden. That's right — he said when. "I think it's inevitable, really, and it's something that people have not

really realised. The technology is getting cheaper and more accessible, so in 10 or 20 years' time there will be holidays in outer space. We're worried that the moon may end up being colonised by Marks and Spencer and McDonald's.

"We are not utopians in the sense that we have everything mapped out, but there's a general consensus that we would like to see environments that are not based around work and we would like the universe not to be messed up any more than it is."

UNFORTUNATELY, AAA is far from solving some of its internal conflicts as it nears the end of its inaugural five-year plan. "We have had huge rows about the dress code. An Italian group called the Shits, which stands for Skinheads as Independent Travellers in Space, wanted a sharp, street-wise dress sense. They thought it was important to make an impression on aliens if we met them, and not look like shaggy fools." There is also a gang called the Disconauts from south London, who want outfits with sequins and fun fur. It is a bit of a dilemma for AAA. "The government priority is something that's not going to fall to bits," says Eden. "We want that, but we want something groovy too."

Such arguments remain hypothetical for now, since AAA has a budget of zero to match its gravity dreams. "The ideal would be to get Nasa defectors," says Buchanan. "What we really need is a mad entrepreneur sitting on buckets of cash, ready to go." Maybe they could contact Richard Branson, who has reached for the stars in his hot-air balloon? "He could be the man," muses Buchanan. "I don't know what his plans for space are, but he has every other form of transport sewn up."

•Find details of Space 1999 at www.deepdisc.com/space1999.

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